

INTRODUCTION TO *SHOFAR* SPECIAL ISSUE: RETHINKING EXILE, CENTER, AND DIASPORA IN MODERN JEWISH CULTURE

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The essays in this special issue stem from a conference held at the University of Cambridge in May 2016 on the theme of "Rethinking Exile, Center, and Diaspora in Modern Jewish Culture." With participants from the UK, Israel, Germany, and the US, the discussions and presentations took their starting point from the reflection that, over the course of multiple centuries prior to the modern era, Jewish culture was shaped in various ways by the concept of "exile" and by the practical circumstances that corresponded to this concept. The conference aimed to explore ways in which inherited Jewish culture has also been reshaped and affected by the presence of nonexilic or anti-exilic dynamics in more recent and contemporary Jewish history.

Historically, the Jewish concept of exile entailed the idea of living in a world without an active geographical center. While Jerusalem and the Land of Israel played a role of such a center in terms of the ancient past and the envisioned messianic future, the present world was understood as one in which, broadly speaking, Jews and Jewish culture possess no geographical center. That is to say, while the Land of Israel constituted a present liturgical focus and a present hope for messianic return, there was not a prominent sense of living "outside of" a geographical center that existed elsewhere in the world. From this perspective, the establishment of the State of Israel marked a significant change: now, a geographic location had arisen that laid claim to a new role of a special "center" for Jewish culture and identity.

The papers at the conference thus asked: how was Jewish culture, previously predicated on a conscious absence of an active geographical center, affected by this emergence of this influential new state of affairs? How did the cultural inheritance of Jewish identity as exilic/diasporic continue to shape the ways in which Jews, both in the State of Israel and in other countries, conceived of Jewishness?

In exploring these questions, the papers also sought to explore ways in which Jewish exilic cultural identity was reshaped and affected by additional

aspects of modernity other than the establishment of State of Israel. For instance, if another key element of Jewish understandings of exile involved political exclusion and subservience, in what ways did the experience of life in America, with its promise of liberty, citizenship, and freedom of religion, reshape Jewish conceptions of "being in exile"? Did the American experiment already functionally constitute an "end of exile" or "negation of exile" even prior to the rise of Zionism? Did life in America cause just a profound a reshaping of Jewish exilic identity as the establishment of the State of Israel? If so, can one trace a similar reshaping of exilic/diasporic identity in other liberal-democratic countries such as France and the United Kingdom?

In addition to historical questions, the papers also sought to tease out implications of these dynamics for contemporary Jewish life and thought. In what ways does the tension between the exilic cultural inheritance and these modern nonexilic elements manifest itself? How does this tension impact political, ethical, literary, artistic, or religious patterns among Jews today? How do the dynamics of "belonging" or "nonbelonging" in other countries affect the attitudes of Jews towards the reality or imagined fantasy of the State of Israel? What are the challenges involved in trying to understand past orientations from the very different circumstances of the present? Do notions of center, Diaspora, and exile mean something very different in Jewish culture today than they meant 250 years ago? Likewise, do they mean something different today than they meant 100, 50, or even 10 years ago? Quite apart from its desirability or undesirability, is it even *possible* to remove the notion of "exile" from Jewish culture?

In this issue of *Shofar*, we present a selection of articles that had their genesis in the conference discussions and presentations. The articles included here capture the diversity of disciplinary and methodological approaches that the participants brought to the questions, ranging from historical investigations, to philosophical and theological reflection, to literary and sociological analysis. Dani Kranz engages the ways in which contemporary Jews living in the historically charged geographic locale of Berlin and of Germany more broadly relate to questions of center, Diaspora, and belonging, with attention to the differing responses of local German Jews, Russian-Jewish immigrants, and Israeli Jews. Mike Witcombe draws upon the concept of the *eruv* to explore Michael Chabon's and Howard Jacobson's novels, looking at the ways in which an "eruvic" analysis can illuminate broader Jewish understandings of "inside" and "outside" and of "at home" and "not at home." Tommy Givens seeks to explore the ways in which "the structured ideological influence of modern nationalism" has affected

Jewish understandings of the Land of Israel and of the idea of homeland, in ways that are frequently underestimated. Finally, Daniel Weiss examines the concept of *shelilat hagalut* (negation of exile/Diaspora) and argues that, even before the rise of Zionism, the political changes entailed by the granting of modern state citizenship to Jews can be seen as negating the geographic universalism affirmed by previous Jewish understandings of national-communal identity, and that modern forms of "diasporism" may be just as complicit in negating *galut* as are more "center-focused" Jewish frameworks.

We hope that these intersecting approaches will spark readers to further thinking and rethinking of their own with regard to the issues of exile, center, and Diaspora.